

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/142937>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial- 4.0 International

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

Commentary on Jecker

Tom Sorell
University of Warwick

Nancy Jecker's paper focuses on the value of sex and sexuality in the lives of older people, and she argues that there is nothing wrong with the use of sex robots to realize that value. She concedes that sex robots marketed today are overwhelmingly designed for heterosexual males, and that their appearance corresponds to certain objectionable stereotypes of sexually attractive women, and of exciting sexual practices. Still, she says, sex robots do not have to be like that, and a less stereotype-ridden design could take away the sexism, heterosexualism and ageism of current ones. I am sympathetic to these conclusions. But I believe that they are not general enough, and I want to take issue with the argumentative strategy that leads to them.

The conclusions are not general enough, because disability or bad circumstantial luck can lead to the damaging absence of sex in the lives of people from *many* adult age groups, not just people in their 70s and 80s. Jecker's paper starts with the case of couples whose sex life deteriorates with old age. But there are also many people, whether disabled or not, who fail to acquire a sex life, and who want one, sometimes desperately. They, too, have a problem that a suitable sex robot might help to solve. Indeed, they might have a *bigger* problem than that of people who are fortunate enough to have had an established and satisfactory sex life over a long period of time, but who are unable to continue it for physiological reasons connected to ageing.

I come next to the argumentative strategy. Jecker's argument for the use by older people of sex robots adopts a framework—the Sen-Nussbaum human capability framework—that allows the value of sex and sexual pleasure to be appreciated alongside other capacities and capabilities needed for an acceptable standard of human life. Her use of this framework helps to counter an ageism that regards sex in old age as either pathological or a kind of indulgence. So far so good. But embedding her anti-ageism within the human capabilities approach leads her to imply that robot-assisted sex for seniors is nothing less than a requirement of human dignity. This seems to me to strike the wrong note in two ways.

First, sex for pleasure and intimacy has value across species, and not only among human beings.¹ Second, although the value of sex in a human life can be very great indeed, the enjoyment of that value is not necessarily, and perhaps not typically, an expression of dignity. Sex gets some of its value from its animality, from its being uninhibited, spontaneous, and not thought out. Dignity is often connected with the mutual recognition of autonomy in a community of practically rational equals. Dignity and the erotic are not straightforwardly connected. Neither, for that matter, are dignity and play, another fixture of the Sen-Nussbaum framework. Still, people can *need* sex:² they can suffer depression,

¹ See B. Bahemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (London: Profile Books, 1999).

² See S. Earle, 'Facilitated Sex and the Concept of Sexual Need: disabled students and their persona' *Disability & Society*, 14 (1999) pp. 309-323.

alienation and other kinds of serious psychological strain without it. Sexual need is a sufficient reason for people to seek relief by harmless means, including with sex robots.

I am suggesting that Jecker's invocation of the capability framework, and with it, human dignity, is unnecessary for justifying machine assisted sex life for older people, or people in general. But further, and now coming to a third way in which the framework does not help, it introduces a damaging tension into the argument. At least one of the normative desiderata of human life that Jecker takes from the capability theorists—affiliation—does double duty in her account. First, it partly explicates the value of sexual life for as long as it lasts between older people who have formed strong ties, including sexual ones, and who are intimate in that they willingly have sex, and in that they know one another extremely well, including what gives them sexual pleasure.

"Affiliation" is also supposed to apply to human-machine interactions, including the use by people of sex robots. But when "affiliation" is achieved by a person with a sex robot of any kind that is likely to exist soon, it seems too denuded to be a continuation of, or substitute for, affiliation achieved through sex with a human, as in the case of older people pursuing a once satisfactory sex life. A human who automatically simulates arousal on demand for their sexual partner, who is receptive to sex no questions asked, no matter where or when, has handed over their sexual will. This means a *single* will determines what sex will be like. Affiliation requires two. In the same way, a robot that automatically acquiesces in the means chosen by its "partners," is not "affiliated" in anything like the sense of older sexually attuned humans.

Sex robots as they are known today seem to me to lie on a spectrum of devices that, at the low-tech end, include vibrators and inflatable sex-dolls. Vibrators can be used within two-person sex, but they are often used by women solo. The solo use of a vibrator or even one's own hand for sexual gratification is a way of producing sexual pleasure *without* affiliation. The use of a sex robot need not be much different. Although it produces an illusion of another person present and enthusiastically participating in sex, the "partner" is in fact only a facsimile of such a person-- without a capacity for enthusiasm in their own right. If affiliation requires distinct wills, I am not sure that a sex robot is capable of affiliation. Instead, the robot owner acts through the robot, choosing its script, repertoire and appearance. Simulating sex with an anatomically correct puppet would, in all essentials, be the same. That does not mean a puppet or robot cannot relieve sexual need and thereby make a significant difference to a person's well-being. But the same goes for the humble vibrator.